

## Group Counseling of High School Underachievers

Robert M. Laxer and Jack Quarter  
University of Toronto

Underachievers manifest a personality syndrome which appears to be very resistant to change through counseling and other remedial procedures. Laxer, Kennedy, Quarter, & Isnor (1966) reported negative results in a large group counseling project involving 260 high school underachievers. Chestnut (1965) reviewed fifteen studies on the counseling of underachievers and found only two which indicated a significant improvement in the major dependent variable, school marks.

Several hypotheses have been advanced to account for the underachievers' lack of response to counseling. Truax (1963) presented evidence which indicated that the amount of counselor empathy and unconditional positive regard for the client is the most important variable in determining the success of the treatment. It is also possible that the effect of counseling of underachievers is not immediately visible. Kolb (1965) discovered no significant differences in school marks between the experimental and control underachievers in his study. However, in a 1-5 year follow-up, the grade point average of experimental subjects (Ss) improved significantly more than the grade point average of controls. In spite of the possibility of delayed results, many studies do not report a follow-up.

Farquhar & Steward (1966), in listing the inadequacies of former approaches to underachievement, offered the following observation. Underachievement, as a multi-caused phenomenon, ordinarily gives rise to many types of underachievers. Not differentiating between types of underachievement creates problems from both the experimental and remedial points of view. In many studies the term "underachievement" is used as a base for identical treatment patterns. By gathering heterogeneous types of underachievers into a given treatment group, forces which both facilitate and inhibit change are set in operation, resulting in no apparent change.

From an experimental viewpoint, having a heterogeneous group of Ss creates the problem of selecting appropriate measures and statistical techniques to assess the effectiveness of the counseling. For example, a group of underachievers may contain Ss who have low self-concepts and Ss who have high self-concepts. If one were to evaluate the success of counseling by comparing the mean change in self-concept of control and experimental groups containing both types of underachievers, there would be an increased probability of a Type II error.

The present study attempted to test the above hypothesis by dividing underachievers into those who are aware and those who are unaware of their academic underachievement. In this way it was hoped to make the underachieving groups more homogeneous. This dichotomy is suggested by Farquhar & Stewart (1966) who speculated that the "awares" include students who may consciously use their underachievement as a weapon against parents who pressure them for better school performance. By informing such students in counseling sessions that they have the ability to do better, one may merely strengthen their defensiveness and perhaps increase academic failure. This negative reaction might very well offset the academic improvement shown by unaware underachievers in the group. The unawares, according to this hypothesis, are more capable of benefiting from insights and support gained in group counseling. The present study, therefore, attempted to account for the previous failures in counseling underachievers by classifying them dichotomously and by using empathetic counselors on a long-term basis.

### Method

Counselor selection. Of the four counselors who participated in the project, three were volunteers from secondary schools in Toronto. Although they had had many years of experience in a guidance program, none had any previous experience in group counseling. The fourth volunteer was a student working toward his Master of Education degree.

Counselor training. The counselors held two meetings before counseling began. They discussed the goals and procedures of the research project. They were asked to use the counseling approach with which they were familiar. Available tapes of the past performance of all four counselors showed that their technique in many respects paralleled the principles of client-centered counseling. Two further meetings were held during the course of the experiment to handle difficulties which had arisen.

Selection of underachievers. The underachievers were selected from the male student population in Grades 10 and 11 of three Toronto secondary schools. The selection procedure was as follows: The grade point average of each student on his Christmas report card was used as the measure of his academic performance, and the IQ score on the Dominion Learning Capacity Test, Intermediate Form A, was used as a measure of expected performance. To estimate each student's achievement relative to the achievement of others in his grade, the two measures were converted to equivalent  $Z$  distributions and the  $Z$  score for IQ for each student was subtracted from the  $Z$  score for marks. Students with an achievement score of less

than - 1.00 Z unit were designated as underachievers. Any underachiever whose grade point average was equivalent to an "A," or whose school record card indicated emotional disturbances, perceptual handicaps or serious conduct problems was excluded from the study.

All of the students in Grades 10 and 11 were given the "Student Personality Inventory." This consisted of a 20-item true-false questionnaire in which S was asked to indicate whether a given trait was descriptive of him. The critical item on this questionnaire was item #15, "academic underachiever." If an underachieving student answered this item as being true about himself, he was classified as an aware underachiever; similarly, if he answered this item as false, he was designated an unaware underachiever.

Four groups were formed. Group 1 consisted of 10 Ss, the entire male unaware underachiever population in School A. Group 2 consisted of 12 Ss, the entire male aware underachiever population in School A. Group 3 consisted of 14 Ss, the entire male underachiever population in School B. Seven of them were aware and seven of them were unaware underachievers. Group 4 consisted of 16 Ss, the entire male underachiever population in School C. Eight of them were aware and eight of them were unaware underachievers.

Within each of the four groups, Ss, were subdivided into control and experimental groups. For Groups 1 and 2, this was accomplished in the following manner: Ss were ranked by achievement Z scores from highest to lowest. The S with the highest score was placed in one subgroup. Ss with the second and third highest scores were placed in the second subgroup; those with the fourth and fifth highest scores were placed in the first subgroup. This procedure continued until all of the underachievers in a group had been assigned to one of the two subgroups. One subgroup was then randomly selected to be counseled and the second to serve as the control.

Groups 3 and 4, consisting of aware and unaware underachievers, were subdivided in the same manner, with the added provision that each of the two mixed groups have an equal number of aware and unaware Ss in both the experimental and control subgroups.

Counseling. To assure that the experimental Ss would not feel that they were compelled by school authority to join group counseling, they were asked by the counselor if they were willing to cooperate in a counseling project for research purposes. All of them agreed to participate. None were informed that they had been chosen because of their scholastic underachievement.

Twice-weekly sessions, 40 minutes in length, were held during the school day for a mean of 15 weeks.

The typical procedure was for the counselor to allow the students to choose the topic of discussion and pursue it freely. At no time did the counselors raise the question of school work out of context, although they participated actively in the group processes.

### Results

One student from Group 3 and one from Group 4 left school before completion of the experiment. In addition, two students dropped from the counseling sessions in Group 4.

For each  $\bar{X}$  a sign difference score was calculated by subtracting the precounseling grade point average (Christmas report card) from the postcounseling grade point average (June report card). A Group X Treatment analysis of variance for change in school marks resulted in a significant difference among groups ( $F(3,40) = 3.41, p .05$ ) but not between treatments. Similarly, an Aware-Unaware X Treatment analysis of variance found none of the effects to be significant.

### Discussion

The failure of group counseling to affect achievement in this study may have been due to at least one of two factors: (a) experience of the counselors, or (b) nature of the group. On the basis of the counselors' reports it would appear that, with the possible exception of Group 1 ("unaware underachievers"), the members of the groups were never successful in developing a strong group identity. Only in Group 1 did the students discuss their school problems with little defensiveness; in the other groups the students displayed little concern for each other and at some points group interaction broke down completely. Clearly the division of underachievers into aware and unaware still allows for immense personality differences, and this excessive heterogeneity of the groups may have been a contributing factor to the failure of group counseling. However, it does not follow that the aware-unaware division failed to create more homogeneous groups or that homogeneity of groups alone is a necessary prerequisite for successful group counseling. It is possible that counselors with more training and experience in the operation of groups could have overcome some of the difficulties met in the group sessions.

While the above two factors may indeed have been operating in the present experiment, this study merely adds

to a growing list of failures to obtain any effects through a group counseling procedure. It is becoming more and more difficult, therefore, to avoid the conclusion that group counseling, conducted by the average guidance counselor, is an impractical way of handling problem students in a school setting.

#### References

- Chestnut, W. J. The effect of structured and unstructured group counseling on male college students' underachievement. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 1965, 12(4), 388-394.
- Farquhar, W. W., & Stewart, N. R. Counseling the low motivated male: a working paper. Unpublished manuscript. Michigan State University, 1966.
- Kolb, D. A. Achievement motivation training for underachieving high-school boys. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1965, 2(6), 783-792.
- Laxer, R. M., Kennedy, D. R., Quarter, J., & Isnor, C. Counseling small groups of underachievers in secondary schools - an experimental study. Ontario Journal of Educational Research, 1966, 9(10), 49-57.
- Truax, C. B. The empirical emphasis in psychotherapy: A symposium. Effective ingredients in psychotherapy: an approach to unravelling the patient-therapist interaction. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 1963, 10(3), 256-263.